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INTERVIEW WITH A PROTESTER INSIDE THE BESIEGED UNIVERSITY IN HONG KONG

DOCUMENTATION HONGKONG, RIOT

The Polytechnic University (PolyU) in Hong Kong was under police siege for more than a week. The interviewed protester is in his early 20s, belongs to left-wing circles, and has been active in the movement for months. The interview took place on November 24, days after he had left the besieged campus. He describes not only the clashes and the series of other events during the siege but also the role of politicians, teachers, and social workers in persuading protesters to surrender.

Let's talk about how all his began. On Thursday, November 14, PolyU was occupied, and barricades were built inside. So how and when did the confrontations with the police start?

They started on Saturday outside the main gate on Cheong Wan Road. First it was more sporadic, but it lasted and continued on Sunday. I got to the streets around PolyU on Sunday afternoon. At that time, the campus was used by protesters to store their material, change clothes, get a rest, or receive medical help. It was around 9 or 10 p.m. that night that the police announced that they had blocked the entrance of PolyU, and that is when the siege started.

What happened at that time inside the university campus?

Until 11 p.m., I stayed outside the campus for most of the time, but I saw that when front-liners got hit by the water cannon with colored pepper spray water they were taken inside the campus and first aiders would help them wash and change clothes. Others were making Molotov cocktails. The canteen was operating and functioning. You could get water and food, and in other sections they also handed out battery chargers, daily necessities, etc. It was organized really well and all done and provided by protesters themselves. The material had been brought in before the siege started.

When the fighting began on Sunday, did people expect that the police would try to surround the campus and start a siege?

Nobody expected a siege. That day, there were two separate confrontations outside the campus on Cheong Wan Road. One took place close to the intersection of Cheong Wan Road and Chatham Road, just opposite the PLA barracks. The front-liners there fought the police from the afternoon until around midnight. The police attacked once in a while with water cannons and armored cars, and the people had to defend themselves against these attacks and keep the line. I stayed around there until about 8pm.

Another group of front-liners was fighting on the other side of Cheong Wan Road, near the foot-bridge to Hung Hom station, on the bridge over the highway. That is where the armored car was repeatedly hit by Molotov cocktails, as you could see in the news. I spent the rest of the evening on that side. At 9 or 10 p.m., the protesters set a road block alight, and there was a huge fire. The fighting was more intense there, also because the armored car was chasing down the bridge, trying to burst through the barricade. If that would have happened, it would have been very dangerous as people had to flee down the bridge.

During those clashes, there was a structure of scouts up in the buildings on campus observing the situation, and they asked people at the front-line to move to certain areas, for instance. The front-liners did not always follow the instructions, though. Scouts did, for instance, ask people to retreat from the intersection of Chatham Road as they thought that place was not good for setting up a defense, but front-liners would not accept and stayed there.

That evening, the police did not manage to break through the lines, but they eventually managed that in the early morning, on Monday, and people tried to escape through the entrance onto the campus? Where were you at the time?

That happened at 5:30 a.m. I was on Cheong Wan Road having a rest. Suddenly people shouted that there were "Raptors" [a special riot police unit] coming and we should move and run. People were scared and screaming. I saw how "Raptors" had already caught and detained someone. Together with a few others we tried to run towards the entrance of PolyU, but we took the wrong turn at one corner and stood in front of a wall. It was a dead end, so we had to run back, then through the entrance and up the stairs to the first platform. The "Raptors" were just three meters away from us. When we ran up the stairs, people already started throwing Molotov cocktails from the second platform above towards the cops. A very dangerous situation. In that moment, I saw how a "Raptor" pushed a protester to the ground and then pointed the gun at me and shot a few rounds. I was hit in the back, probably by a rubber bullet or bean bag.

Were they also shooting tear gas?

No, not in that situation. I could see that people were hysterical as Molotov cocktails were thrown from above, and everyone got really scared. However, I also saw people using water to contain the fire and make sure the building would not be set alight and burn down. People continued throwing Molotov cocktails for a while to stop the police, while others sprayed water on the surrounding walls.

When I had made it up to the second platform and onto the campus, I called a friend who is a student there and asked whether there are other exits. He named two other places, one of which was the foot bridge that was already burning, and the other one was already surrounded by police.

Were you thinking of leaving then?

No, not me. But friends called me and were looking for other friends who were trapped inside. So I started to look around, see which places were safe for people to hide and which exits were still available.

How did you feel when you realized you were surrounded and could not leave?

I thought that the police would storm the campus very soon, so I figured I should stay there, but I was also scared and tired.

Many people tried to escape that day. What were your impressions during that period?

Before 3 p.m. on Monday, there were three attempts by protesters to break through the police lines and get out of the campus. A bigger group of front-liners tried to set up a defensive line outside the main gate to create a path through which people could evacuate. All of the attempts failed.

Later, around 10 or 11 p.m., the media showed reports that demonstrators outside tried to get to PolyU from different directions. [See *this report on the situation outside*.] People inside encouraged each other and prepared to be able to leave at any moment as they hoped to get out and meet the demonstrators who were trying to break through the police lines from outside.

Around the same time, some pro-government politicians and lecturers made a deal with the police. Under-18s should be able to go out, have their names registered, but were then let go. Over 18s could go out with the politicians, would be immediately arrested but not harmed or hit by the police. Before that, already some school principals had tried to get in to talk to their students, but they had not been allowed in by the police.

When the politicians and lecturers came, how did the front-liners react?

This is one of the set-backs as there were a lot of divisions among the protesters. Around 11 p.m., some shouted and accused those who were leaving. They told them: "You don't deserve to be our comrade!" However, they also begged them to stay. Many of those who wanted to leave were crying then. There were also parents who had come in, and they hugged and kissed their kids. People were also worried and panicking because of the pressure. Others were shouting at those who were about to leave that there were people already coming to rescue everyone and that nobody had to go like that and be arrested by the police.

Between 1 and 2 a.m., the front-liners who stayed dispersed into the buildings. There seemed to be little chance that they could break out together, while those who tried to get to PolyU from outside still seemed quite some distance away.

How did you all get by that day and night?

On Monday, nobody was cooking food in the canteen, but you could go in there and get cold and dry food yourself. There was water, we could use the toilets, and we could find places to sleep, but the environment and the toilets were very dirty already.

So throughout the night and on Tuesday, several hundred people left the campus.

Yes, people kept leaving. The politicians, social workers, and school principals came in throughout the morning to pick people up and accompany them when they went out.

How did you feel when you saw all of them leaving?

It was surely devastating. There were people who wanted to stay, but when they kept seeing people leaving they felt as if no one was supporting them. Those who left felt a lot of guilt. They were in this dilemma between thinking about their personal safety or about the movement, and they had to make a choice. Deciding to leave made them feel guilty.

At that time, did people still fear an attack by the police?

I had expected that the police might enter the buildings and raid the place during the night. It did not happen, and in the morning there was no one manning the barricades. They had all disappeared into the buildings and barricaded themselves in there.

The police made statements and tried to intimidate the protesters by saying that people had to surrender and would all be charged with rioting. What was the impact on the people inside?

Those police threats already started on Sunday night. When I was on the bridge on Cheong Wan Road, I heard that the police were also playing these songs from the other side of the barricades, songs from the 1970s and 1980s with lyrics like "you are already surrounded," or one about going to jail, getting out, and becoming a good person. There was another one about saying good-bye to your school life. The feelings expressed were about "departing" and about "letting it go." They played these songs on Monday night and a few times on Tuesday. It was hilarious, and it had no effect on the protesters.

Other tactics than the threats and songs were more effective, like sending in these politicians who pretended to be caring and asked people to surrender.

So people were leaving during the day on Tuesday. What did you do?

In the morning, I went to see whether a particular escape route was still open. There are stairs down to an emergency fire door, and when there was no police it was possible to escape through that door. 60 to 70 people managed it. People were cuing up on the stairs and leaving their gear there as they had to be able to blend in as soon as they got out.

Later, in the afternoon, I witnessed how a politician from the Pan-Democrats announced that he understood that one group wanted to leave and another one wanted to stay, and that he would follow the bigger group. It turned out that the group of those who wanted to leave was bigger. So he led them through the entrance of PolyU and through the police line where they were all arrested, except the politician.

I also thought about whether I should leave or not. I got into a Telegram group that was about finding routes to escape. These were people from outside who tried to help people to get out. I checked out one of the escape routes that was discussed. There were rumors on the channel that a break-out attempt was organized for 3 a.m., but then it was canceled. This was not the group that organized the successful abseil action on the foot bridge, though.

I saw that some people tried to escape through the drainage system. Someone seems to have succeeded to get out that way and got help from outside.

How did you feel when you eventually left?

First, I talked to different people to see what their feelings were. I visited different groups which had barricaded themselves in in different buildings. I am sure that some of them wanted to defend themselves and never leave willingly. Others asked me whether this or that escape plan would work or which route would be open.

I had mixed feelings when I eventually left the campus as there were still people inside being trapped. At that point, it had become clear that the police would not storm the campus but use other tactics, like trying to wait it out and see that those inside lose energy and eventually surrender.

When you left, were you arrested?

I was stopped and checked, like all the others, and they charged me with rioting.

Let's talk a bit about why you support the movement?

At first, I had questions about this movement and doubts, for example, about the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times." But then I thought if I did not enter the movement, I would not be able to understand it. Now I don't care so much anymore,

whatever slogan they want to shout they can shout. I just don't follow some of the slogans.

That explains some of your motivations, but not why you take the risks of being seriously injured and locked up for years.

On Sunday I started to think about the risk of arrest and the consequences of my actions. At that time, I think the value of staying outweighed the risk and the consequences. Of course, I was also afraid. So I could not bear the fact that people were remaining inside PolyU but I was also concerned about my own safety and the consequences I will face.

Okay, but where is the connection between the risk and the movement? We saw the dynamic on Sunday, the police attack, but that is only the escalation on that day. You have been involved in the movement for months. Could you say something about why you support the movement in general, as a left-wing activist.

When I participate, I don't stress that I am left-wing. And this movement is not about winning by defeating the police. There are other things at stake, but I am still exploring it, like important values, democracy, more effective communication within the mass movement, an acceptable level of violence people can use. It is also about everyday life, and I keep on thinking about what kind of life people envision and want to build. So I ask myself where all that energy that is coming from the movement should go. There certainly is a lot of energy, and people do, in some way, question the existing values or habits and now consider other ways.

taken from here

[← PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT →](#)

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- ALL INPUT

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